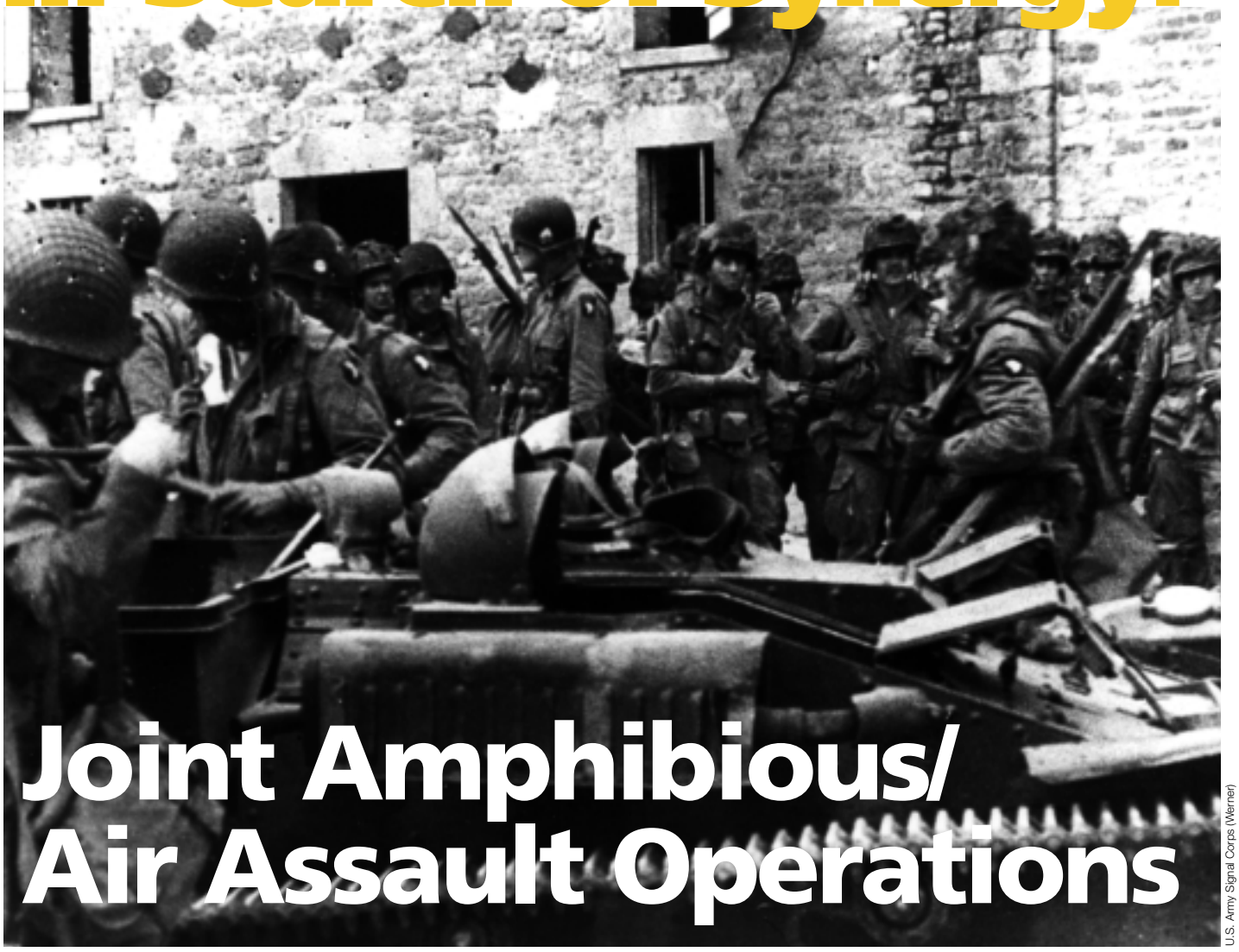
In Search of Synergy:



Joint Amphibious/ Air Assault Operations

U.S. Army Signal Corps (Werner)

Normandy, 1944.

By JAMES B. BROWN

On June 6, 1944, the 101st Airborne Division dropped behind enemy lines and seized key bridges and roads to block coordinated Nazi counterattacks against the amphibious landings at Normandy. The operation was complicated by missed drop zones and poor night illumination, which protected jumpers but caused fatal crashes of gliderborne troops—including the assistant division commander. Regardless of cost, the appearance of paratroopers in the enemy rear created massive confusion and contributed greatly to the success of the D-Day landings.[1]

On June 6, 20XX, the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) conducts a deep strike and air assaults 200 km behind the shoreline to seize terrain and impose operational shock on an enemy commander and block his forces from influencing the amphibious operations area of the 2d Marine Air-Ground Task Force as it seizes the beach, airport, and capital of country X. The MAGTF then moves swiftly to bring ashore ships

Major James B. Brown, USA, is executive officer, 716th Military Police Battalion, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault).

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U.S. Navy (James G. McCarter)

Light armored vehicle landing, RIMPAC '98.

that deliver mechanized forces of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Brigade. These forces link up with the 101st and carry the campaign into its final phase.

In World War II the United States took advantage of its insular geography and massive industrial strength. More significantly, it took the time to fully develop the force structure needed to wage the war of annihilation that defeated the Axis.[2] The Army spent two years preparing to invade Europe. Army amphibious operations were first developed for the capture of North Africa in November 1943 in Operation Torch before being rehearsed and perfected for the Normandy invasion of June 1944. Future conflicts will not offer such luxuries.

Technology has increased the ability of enemies to bring conflict to our national airspace and our interdependent global economy, greatly reducing response time and thus our traditional geographic and industrial advantages. The impact of emerging technologies practically guarantees that future amphibious operations will be come-as-you-are. It is thus critical that our forces form and rehearse joint force packages to wage conflicts abroad without the traditional preparation time. The 101st Airborne Division and Marine Corps are ideally suited to create a joint force to apply what the Commandant of the Marine Corps calls operational maneuver from the sea (OMFTS).

Marine Supremacy with Deep Support

The tenets of OMFTS call for a force that can simultaneously engage an enemy "across his full operational depth."[3] Attacking throughout the battlespace creates an "operational shock" that stuns an enemy commander, rendering him unable to make sound decisions or to command and control his forces. Continual improvements in doctrine, training, and matériel combined with a relentless commitment to excellence have secured global supremacy for the Marine Corps in amphibious operations.

Currently, the Marine Corps can seize an amphibious landing area with seaborne troops brought ashore at speeds of over 40 knots aboard landing craft air cushion (LCAC) landing assault vehicles in concert with heliborne troops who conduct air movement to shore. Under the safety of naval fires (missiles and guns) and Marine and Navy air, marines secure the amphibious area of operations for RORO ships that can deliver a prepositioned brigade of mechanized marines ashore to expand the lodgment and attack deep into the enemy rear. At the same time, the recently established prepositioned Army armored brigade afloat can be brought ashore for passing through Marine forces to sustain the deep fight.[4]

82d Airborne jump, Centrazbat '97.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (David L. Wilcoxson)

USS Belleau Wood and *USS Essex* in Arabian Gulf.

31st Marine Expeditionary Unit (R.M. Katz)

Cuts in the Marine budget, force structure, and procurement of LCACs and equipment have increased the vulnerability of the amphibious operations area to massed mechanized counterattack. The battle at the beachhead can hang in the balance and will ultimately go to the commander who can bring more forces to the point of battle. The 101st Airborne Division was first used to prevent this very threat at Normandy in 1944 and can blunt it again.

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The division possesses unique deep strike and armor killing capabilities with its 72 Apache and 32 Kiowa Warrior helicopters. Three air assault infantry brigades supported by three assault helicopter battalions (90 UH–60 Blackhawks) and a medium lift helicopter battalion (48 C–47D Chinooks), divisional artillery with fifty-four 105 mm and eighteen 155 mm howitzers, and combat support and combat service support units can air assault up to 350 km into the enemy rear to block counterattacks against the amphibious objective area (AOA).[5] The capability to isolate a foe from lines of communication and reinforcements can ensure immediate success at the beachhead and help transfer the focus from the amphibious area to the enemy center of gravity.

The similarities between this mission and the first combat mission of the 101st Airborne Division are striking. However, revolutionary developments in attack helicopter technology and night fighting have now ideally suited the 101st for tank killing (a previously endemic weakness of airborne forces) and night combat (also a weakness due to command and control problems).

To grasp the capabilities of the 101st to support amphibious operations, it is important to understand the four phases of an air assault operation. They are often misunderstood by fellow Army officers who, although familiar with the equipment involved, frequently view the 101st Airborne Division as a light division with extra helicopters.

Directing amphibious landing, RIMPAC '96.

U.S. Navy (Felix Garza, Jr.)

Landing craft off Sardinia, Dynamic Mix '98.

U.S. Navy (Paul W. Brown)

Air Assault Operations

The four phases of an air assault are setting the conditions, air assault, expanding the lodgment, and linkup. They are more akin to amphibious operations than to traditional Army operations. Thus Colonel Neil Nelson, a chief of staff of the 101st, referred to air assault as "amphibious operations of the air." In fact, recent exercises where the division has supported Marine operations have demonstrated that Marine leaders have an inherent understanding of air assault, which makes for efficient working relations.

The first phase, setting the conditions, is the deep strike conducted with the combined effects of deep attack helicopter strikes, artillery raids, and deep coordinated fires of higher headquarters to destroy enemy forces that are either in the objective area of the air assault or close enough to influence the battle there. This phase is not time driven but rather focuses on results. An air assault will not be launched until the right conditions are achieved. This is perhaps the most difficult phase for Army officers to understand since many of their operations are synchronized primarily on time and not events. Defining the conditions depends on an intricate intelligence preparation of the battlefield that leads to identification, targeting, and destruction of enemy forces. Once the conditions are met they are constantly reevaluated until the commander determines that they have been set (from one to three days). The assault is then launched.

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The air assault, like the deep attack, is most frequently launched at night and brings the division's combat forces into the rear where they seize and hold key terrain to disrupt enemy lines of communication and cut off reinforcements from the front lines. The 101st Airborne Division typically deploys a full brigade with its combat support elements (field artillery, air defense artillery, engineer, intelligence, chemical, military police,

and medical). The remaining brigades deploy for further operations later that day or on successive nights. The first brigade task force to air assault is primarily responsible for securing the objective area and facilitating the air assault of the remaining brigades which then expand the lodgment.

Third, expanding the lodgment, is enlarging the AOA to secure all the assault objectives. It consolidates follow-on forces of the 101st Airborne Division into the objective area to complete the mission and prepare for future operations.

The final phase is linkup, whereby friendly forces break through enemy lines to join with the 101st and are passed rapidly forward through its objective area to fight deeper into the enemy rear. During all phases, Apache and Kiowa Warrior attack aviation relentlessly strikes to strip an enemy commander of fire support, air defense, and armored fighting systems across an expanding arc of influence known as the outer ring of the air assault operational area.

Synergy in the Air

The Marine air wing that supports amphibious operations also targets enemy forces that move to influence the AOA. The current wing includes a mix of FA–18 Hornets and AV–8B Harriers. Future wings will include short take-off and landing aircraft that will also focus on the deep fight. One of the most critical areas of an air assault operation is synchronized control of air assets during the conditions setting and assault. Marine amphibious commanders are extremely sensitive to the integration of fixed-wing assets to support deep attacks. The synergy of combining three attack aviation battalions of the 101st with a Marine air wing will result in more deep targets being eliminated and may free Marine fixed-wing assets to support the close fight in the AOA.

The 101st Airborne Division battle staff already has experience working as a subordinate staff to commanders of Marine expeditionary forces in major staff exercises involving both force projection and noncombatant evacuation. These drills have demonstrated the ability of Marine leadership to leverage the division's capabilities. The inherent similarities between air assault and amphibious operations, as well as the elite aura of these two organizations, create a unique joint force package on the staff level. It is now time to take the experiment a step farther and incorporate deep air assault capabilities in Marine amphibious operations. The projection of the 10th Mountain Division (Light) from the aircraft carrier *USS America* into Haiti in 1994 showed what can result when we break down traditional service walls in search of a new synergy. An Army official aboard the carrier during the operation affirmed the need for practice: "The key to this operation is combat rehearsals. You have to make it work before you show up in theater and are trying it for the first time."[6]

The purpose of supporting amphibious operations with the 101st Airborne Division is to apply operational shock against an enemy commander while freeing Marine assets to concentrate on the AOA—with a significantly reduced threat of counterattack from enemy forces outside the area. This concept is well grounded in the OMFTS principles that have become the tenets for future amphibious employment. The 101st Airborne Division, although most often outnumbered and fighting deep in the enemy rear, has never lost a battle. Likewise, the Marine Corps has never failed to attain an objective. It is time to bring these elite forces together for further experimentation toward a new synergy. The results will no doubt be historic for these proud forces and devastating for our enemies. *Semper fi! Air assault!* JFQ

NOTES

[1] For an account of the division during World War II, see Leonard Rapport and Arthur Northwood, Jr., *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of the 101st Airborne Division* (Sweetwater, Tenn.: 101st Airborne Division Association, 1948).

[2] Russell Weigley theorizes that the American approach to war is annihilation, a strategy that relies on the synergistic effect of marshaling resources in an overwhelming military machine that can destroy an enemy armed force. See *The American Way of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

[3] Charles C. Krulak, "Operational Maneuver from the Sea," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 123, no. 1 (January 1997), pp. 26–31.

[4] On the brigade afloat see James F. Pasquarette and William G. Foster, "An Army Heavy Brigade Goes Afloat," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings,* vol. 120, no. 5 (May 1994), pp. 89–92.

[5] In the Gulf War, the 101st Airborne Division attacked 420 km into the Iraqi rear using forward operating bases (Cobra and Viper) which cut off forward Iraqi units from reenforcement and retreat. The division could provide the Marines similar support in amphibious operations. See Edward M. Flanagan, Jr., *Lightning: The 101st in the Gulf War* (Washington: Brassey's, 1994).

[6] Interview with Rick Cantwell, December 31, 1996.